



Missouri River Conservation Districts Council

2021–2022 Annual Report



*Devoted to conservation of the Missouri River's natural resources through
grassroots collaboration, education, incentives, and voluntary action.*

Introduction

We are happy to provide you this annual report of the Missouri River Conservation Districts Council's (MRCDC) activities for FY 2022. While the work over the year cannot be simplified to a few paragraphs or even a few pages, we hope you enjoy reading through this for a more detailed account of the Council's activities.

Coming in on the back side of the Covid-19 pandemic, Council has worked hard to get projects and activities that had slowed down back up and going again. Particularly, this includes the Charles M. Russell Community National Wildlife Refuge Working Group and the Montana Saltcedar Team.

MRCDC welcomed a new Secretary, Trish Smith, and Financial Manager, Katie Lund, to the team. They have both been great assets to have on board. To learn more about all the team, read further on in this report.

Other ongoing projects include being involved in the Fort Peck Dam Test Flow discussions, River Rendezvous tour, partnering with the Central and Eastern Montana Invasive Species Team, Ranching for Rivers, Living on the Bank website, comment and support letters, and being a member of the Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee (MRRIC).

Montana is the only state that has an organization such as the Missouri River Conservation Districts Council to coordinate conservation efforts within the entire watershed. This unique approach leverages funds for important projects across land ownerships for maximum ecological benefit.

As you read through the report, please consider how we may better serve the region through future projects. We look forward to continuing work with partners and finding new, innovative ways to meet the needs of our member districts in FY 2023.

Sincerely,

Laura Kiehl, Chairman

Molly Masters, Coordinator



Council members and staff who attended MRCDC's quarterly meeting in November of 2021. In the top row starting on the left: Dana Berwick, Jeff Pattison, Dean Rogge, Steve Wanderaas, Bruce Anderson, Karl Christians. In the bottom row starting on the left: Greg Jergeson, Laura Kiehl, Rick Anderson, Molly Masters and Jim Beck.

Staff Introductions

Molly Masters, Coordinator - mrcdc@macdnet.org (406) 454-0056

Molly grew up on a cow/calf ranch outside of Hardin, Montana. She attained an Animal Science degree and then a Land Resources and Environmental Sciences degree while employed with Montana State University Extension as an Agriculture and 4-H Extension Agent. Molly and her husband have a one-year-old son, Lester. She and Lester help Dad with his family's ranch and her family ranch as often as they can.

Trish Smith, Secretary - petroleumcd@macdnet.org (406) 429-6646 x104

Trish (Rowton) Smith, husband Brent, and two daughters live in Winnett, MT. She grew up on her families ranch in Mosby, MT, graduated from Winnett High School, obtained a MLT degree at the University of Montana and a Business Fundamentals certificate through MSU-GFs. Trish's past work included over 10 years in various hospital laboratories, seasonal work with the Forest Service, and recently managing the Winchester Arms Collectors Association for eight years. She enjoys family time spent outdoors, and painting/photography.

Katie Lund, Financial Manager - lundangus@gmail.com (406) 951-0212

Katie and her husband, along with their five children, run a Registered Black Angus operation east of Winnett. Being first generation Petroleum County ranchers, they have a deep appreciation of the land and the incredible value of raising their children in the dirt and showing them the value of hard work and constant perseverance. In her "spare" time, Katie is an avid walleye fisherwoman, loves the mountains and all things family and animals.

Council Representatives

Big Sandy CD - Cory Danreuther and alternate Dana Darlington

Blaine County CD - Bruce Anderson and alternate Greg Jergeson

Broadwater CD - Dallas Diehl and alternate Greg Fields

Cascade County CD - John Chase and alternate Gayla Wortman

Choteau County CD - Rick Anderson and alternate Lorna Krause

Fergus CD - Lorri Schafer

Gallatin CD - Tammy Swinney and alternate Mike Hansen

Garfield County CD - Dean Rogge and alternate Monte Billing

Lewis & Clark CD - Karl Christians (*Vice Chair*) and alternate Jeff Ryan

McCone CD - Steve Wanderaas and alternate Quinn Hardy

Petroleum County CD - Laura Kiehl (*Chair*) and alternate Jay King

Phillips CD - Hal DeBoer and alternate Pat Anderson

Richland County CD - Dick Iverson and alternate Danny Young

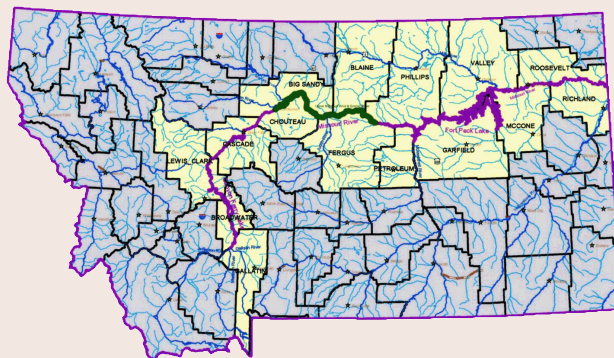
Roosevelt County CD - Dana Berwick

Valley County CD - Jeff Pattison and alternate Ron Garwood

About MRCDC

Mission

The mission of the Council is to represent natural resource and environmental interests on and along the Missouri River, the associated uplands, and its tributaries. The Council believes the conservation of the river and the sustainability of its various uses can best be accomplished through grassroots collaboration, education, incentives, and voluntary action.



Purpose

The purpose is to provide leadership, assistance, and guidance to conservation districts along the Missouri River corridor in order to present a unified front and collective voice when addressing natural resource issues, opportunities, and challenges. "A forum for Missouri River stakeholders to share perspectives, solve problems, and exchange information on Missouri River resource management."

15 Conservation Districts

Blaine | Big Sandy | Broadwater | Cascade | Chouteau | Fergus | Gallatin | Garfield | Lewis and Clark | McCone | Petroleum | Phillips | Richland | Roosevelt | Valley

Goals

- 1: Encourage and promote sound conservation practices, such as "Best Management Practices" for multiple use of the river and adjoining lands.
- 2: Facilitate conservation districts' voice in partnerships that affect the river corridor.
- 3: Enhance community involvement in river stewardship.
- 4: Maintain and improve water quantity and quality at critical times.
- 5: Support bird, fish, and wildlife habitat and wildlife programs compatible with agriculture and multiple uses.

Montana's Missouri River

145,000 Square Mile Watershed | 790 River Miles | 10 Dams



Missouri River's National Importance

500,000 Square Mile Watershed | 2,341 River Miles | 10 States and 2 Canadian Provinces

Missouri River Uses listed by US Army Corps of Engineers

Flood Control | Navigation | Municipal and Industrial Water Supply | Hydropower | Fish and Wildlife | Recreation | Water Quality | Irrigation

Montana Saltcedar Team

Saltcedar is listed as a noxious plant in Montana. This invasive tree spreads rapidly along riverbanks and lake shores replacing the iconic cottonwood and using large amounts of water during the warm summer months. It has become a real problem on the banks of the Missouri River and its tributaries. Having multiple landowners, including private, state, federal, and tribal lands, can make it a challenge to control when using a shotgun approach. Members of the Council recognized this and wanted to adopt a more organized, watershed management approach with partnerships and cooperation, thus the Montana Saltcedar Team (MST) was born in 2016. Since that initial meeting, the group has coordinated two large control projects on the Missouri River and Fort Peck Reservoir controlling saltcedar on over 120 miles of the Missouri and its tributaries.

Over the past year, MRCDC has worked to reignite the MST efforts. This included two meetings, one for partners to share about current saltcedar control projects and discuss options for the MST, the other to get updates on biocontrol research and efforts and using EddMaps. There is a lot of interest and need to expand capacity of the MST efforts around Montana, including adding other woody invasive species and increasing the number of on-the-ground projects. Discussions and continued partnerships are being utilized to make this happen in the coming year.

Living on the Bank

In helping protect peoples' investments along rivers and streams in Montana the website livingonthebank.com was created. The goal of the website is to help property buyers and owners make responsible decisions in buying, building, and managing their dream properties.

Practical advice regarding *living on the bank* can be found on the site including information regarding erosion and flooding, improving and maintaining property, permit requirements, septic system design, boat ramps and docks, bank vegetation, proper agriculture and livestock use, and much more. Being educated about these actions will help preserve Montana's landscape and way of life.

The site has been given some updates over the last year and the committee is working on making additional content to the site. The committee is looking forward to furthering the usefulness and outreach of the website in the coming year.

River Rendezvous

The Missouri River Conservation Districts Council (MRCDC), in partnership with the Petroleum County Conservation District (PCCD), Musselshell Watershed Coalition (MWC), and Montana Conservation Corps (MCC) held a successful River Rendezvous touring around Petroleum, Musselshell, and Garfield Counties in Montana.

The hot, long, but good day started out in Winnett with breakfast provided by the Winnett ACES Community Enhancement Committee (CEC) at the Oddfellow's building. This is a building revitalization project being conducted by the Winnett ACES. The history and future of the building was shared.

From there, participants loaded the bus rented from the Winnett School, and headed to the first stop viewing LT-PBR (Low Tech-Process Based Restoration), also known as BDA (Beaver Dam Analog) projects. MCC and their partners shared the benefits these projects have to the land, which according to the LT-PBR Design Manual, "An over-arching goal of riverscape restoration and conservation is to improve the health of as many miles as possible, while ensuring those systems achieve and maintain their potential in self-sustaining ways." The projects mimic beaver dams in all types of drainages, even in sagebrush prairie, to hold back rain runoff and create a diverse plant area for all species of insects, birds, and animals to thrive in.



Participants of the River Rendezvous are shown viewing and learning about low-tech process-based restoration structures. Photo credit: Randell Hopkins

The group had a rest stop at the park in Roundup for beverages and a deluxe sandwich lunch with all the fixings, provided by MRCDC. The participants shared some laughs and visiting, and a chance of winning from a wonderful selection of sponsor donated door prizes.

The next stop was Kilby Butte Hutterite Colony east of Roundup. Here the tour group was able to see the completed Musselshell River bank stabilization project, called a "Willow Lift", that was finished over the 2021-2022 winter by the MWC, the colony, and other partners. It was done with three layers and three levels of large rocks and about 30,000 willow cuttings, harvested near the site. The willows have taken root, are growing and will be ready to stand up to their first flood event soon.

After the project visit, the Colony gave the tour participants an inside look at their life. As the smallest colony in Montana with 21 residents, they have their own meat processing facility with a laundry facility in the back, a church/cookhouse, and a small group of children all under the age of five, who were playfully enjoying and entertaining the visitors.

MWC also helped organize the next stop further down the Musselshell River regarding another proposed bank stabilization project. Through collaboration and partnerships, including Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, several ideas are being considered. These ideas propose adding to and/or creating a natural shelf that would have a combination of native cottonwoods and willows with rocks and gravel to hold the shoreline in one section and possibly using a Willow Lift in another section to slow the progression of bank loss on an outside corner of the river.

We drove over the bridge across the Musselshell into Garfield County to take a much needed break at the Montana Highway Department Rest Area and had a quick look at the signs that give a history of that area.

The tour concluded at the Petrolia Reservoir. Petrolia Irrigation District educated participants on the history and the infrastructure that is in place for area irrigation. Many of the participants were surprised to see such a well-run irrigation project in the middle of Petroleum County. The aging infrastructure of the irrigation district was discussed, and many suggestions of help were offered from MRCDC and the Natural Resource Conservation Service, who had several people in attendance.

The day ended with a nice taco dinner, also provided by the Winnett ACES CEC at Flatwillow Hall, which is a few miles south of Winnett at the town of Flatwillow. The hall is on the National Historic Register and brought about a lot of comments about its value to the community. There was more visiting, laughing, and sharing of thoughts and ideas from the tour, as well as more of the sponsor donated door prizes.

On the evaluations, the tour had great feedback from all participants. One person with years of experience stated, "I may have attended close to a hundred similar events over the last 40 plus years but this was one of the best!" Thank you to everyone who came and enjoyed the River Rendezvous!



This is a picture along the Musselshell River where a bank stabilization project is being proposed. Photo credit: Randell Hopkins



Roller compacted concrete levels that slow water down as it pours over the spillway from Petrolia Reservoir are shown here. Photo credit: Randell Hopkins

CMR Community Working Group

The Missouri River Conservation Districts Council (MRCDC) is the leading stakeholder and coordinating entity of the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR) Community Working Group (CWG). This group is comprised of local, state, and federal agencies, private landowners, ranchers, non-government organizations (NGOs), and interested individuals that are concerned with the vitality of the CMR and the surrounding six-county region. The group serves as a forum for discussion of important issues, stakeholder updates, and regional projects.

The CMR CWG is back on track having hybrid meetings (in-person and virtual attendees) every other month, after holding a couple virtual only meetings during the thick of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the December 2021 meeting, the focus was reconnecting with one another, giving updates, and coming up with a list of potential CWG meeting topics for the future.

At the next meeting, the topic was sage-grouse. There was a panel with five agencies, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, US Fish Wildlife Services, US Bureau of Land Management, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, and the Montana Sage Grouse Oversight Team, whom each presented on the programs and work regarding sage-grouse and the improvement of their habitat in the landscape.

Invasive species are always a great topic to learn more about so that was the focus of the May meeting. There were presentations regarding invasive annual grasses, specifically ventenata, cheatgrass, Japanese brome, and Medusahead, aquatic invasive species and the boat check stations across Montana, and an update given from the Montana Invasive Species Team on the work they are doing.

At the most recent meeting, the discussion topic was drought. Questions answered by ranchers included how they are getting along, what they have had to do differently, and if their drought management plan has changed and how? With this topic can come a lot of stress, so there was a short presentation from Montana State University Extension Health and Wellness Specialist regarding mental health. Overall, there was a lot of great discussion.

For the most up to date information regarding the CMR Community Working Group, please visit its website at <http://www.cmrcwg.org/>.



December 1, 2021 was the first in person meeting since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Here is a picture of in person and virtual participants at that meeting.

Public Comment and Support Letters

Part of MRCDC's stated purpose is to *present a unified front and collective voice when addressing natural resource issues, opportunities, and challenges*. Two ways Council accomplishes this are writing public comment letters regarding pertinent issues that may affect Conservation Districts, their areas, and/or their constituents, and writing letters of support when needed.

Conservation Districts are governmental groups of non-partisan people, publicly elected who volunteer their time to oversee local conservation efforts in their district. The specific Montana Code Annotated (MCA) 76-15-102 Declaration of Policy says, "It is hereby declared to be the policy of the legislature to provide for the conservation of soil and soil resources of this state, for the control and prevention of soil erosion, for the prevention of floodwater and sediment damages, and for furthering the conservation, development, utilization, and disposal of water and thereby to preserve natural resources, control floods, prevent impairment of dams and reservoirs, preserve wildlife, protect the tax base, protect public lands, and protect and promote the health, safety, and general welfare of the people of this state."

Because MRCDC is made up of the fifteen Conservation Districts along the Missouri River in Montana, our mission and purpose relate directly to Conservation Districts' granted authorities in MCA 76-15-102. Public comment letters and letters of support Council approves of all regard potential impacts to one or multiple items that are listed in the Montana Code.

Council has submitted letters regarding the following topics:

- ◆ American Conservation and Stewardship Atlas
- ◆ American Prairie Reserve Change of Use on Bureau of Land Management Permits
- ◆ Bureau of Land Management's Greater Sage-Grouse Land Use Management Plan
- ◆ Canyon Cattle Conservation Easement Project with Prickly Pear Land Trust
- ◆ Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge Stakeholder Perspectives Document
- ◆ Federal Emergency Management Agency National Flood Insurance Program
- ◆ Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks Habitat Conservation Lease Agreements
- ◆ Montana Headwaters Legacy Act
- ◆ Montana Invasive Species Council grant application to American the Beautiful Challenge Grant
- ◆ Ranching for Rivers grant application to Montana Department of Environmental Quality
- ◆ US Army Corps of Engineers Fort Peck Dam Master Plan Scoping Period
- ◆ US Army Corps of Engineers Fort Peck Shoreline Management Plan
- ◆ USDA Forest Service Lewis and Clark National Forest Management Plan

Fort Peck Dam Test Flows

The United States Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) intends to test the flows coming from Fort Peck Dam in hopes it will benefit pallid sturgeon recruitment and fry survival above Lake Sakakawea, North Dakota. The proposal originates from required Endangered Species Act consultation with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, who issued a “no jeopardy” biological opinion in April 2018 on the condition that the Corps pursues the test flow.

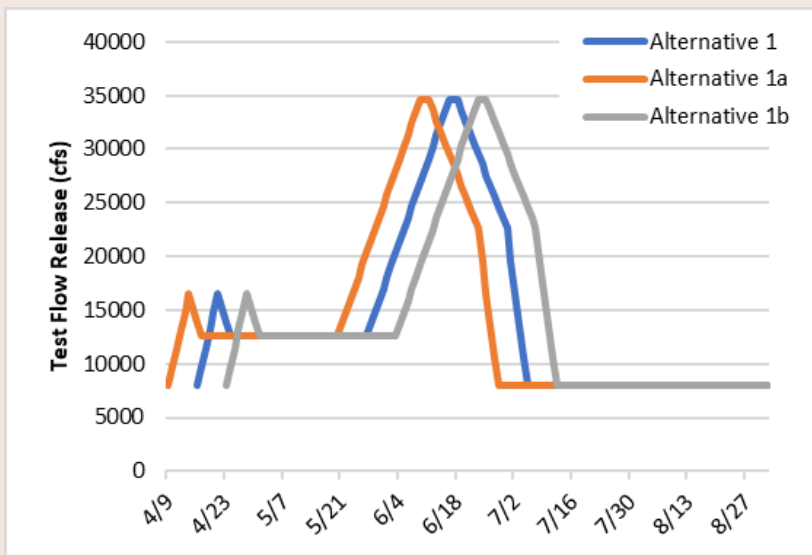
The Corps came out with a record of decision in November of 2021 on the final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). As it stands, there are a series of issues that could be detrimental to irrigation operators and agriculture businesses with the highest proposed river test flows of approximately 35,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) in June followed by substantially lower flows of about 8,000 cfs by July 1 (Graph A).

The test flows are incredibly concerning for the approximately 160 pump sights located

downstream of Fort Peck Dam, providing irrigation for 70,000 acres of cropland between Richland, Roosevelt, Valley and McCone counties as well as the Fort Peck Tribes. This would not only affect the farmers, but local communities and businesses such as Sidney Sugars Inc. Sidney Sugars has told MRCDC that the incurred losses due to test flows will likely be enough to shut down the refinery. The EIS stated a loss of \$7,000,000 in farm income during a test flow year, but MRCDC believes this loss is greatly underestimated because it does not account for several other losses that will occur. The EIS assumes the ability to continue irrigating and no change in crop production for the mainstem intakes as well as no change in employment, sales or income in the region.

Since the record of decision was announced, MRCDC has been diligently educating Montana congressman, North Dakota conservation districts that will be affected and their congressman, the Montana legislative Water Policy Interim Committee and Council’s stakeholders and partners. Due to the continued drought in Eastern Montana, the Fort Peck Reservoir water elevation level was too low this year to conduct the test. This has bought time to continue working with stakeholders and the Corps on the Test Flow.

Discussions have been ongoing between Council representatives, the Corps, hydropower, and the Fort Peck Tribe regarding the test flows. This includes conducting additional surveys along ten miles of the Missouri River to look closer at pump site



Graph A : This demonstrates the maximums and minimums cfs allowed following the EIS during a Test Flow year beginning in April and ending September 1.

flooding effects at specific cfs levels. Additionally, having representation on the Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee (MRRIC) allows for discussions through that route as well.

Council created a document stating the concerns from the EIS. Here are highlights from that document:

High Flow Issues:

- ♦ The maximum 35,000 cfs allowable is too high – may flood pumps, electrical boxes, access roads and potentially cropland itself.
- ♦ Impacts to mainstem intakes should include losses in crop production – there will be substantial loss due to an inability to irrigate after high flows recede.
- ♦ After the higher flows recede, the riverbed stability will be wet, silt laden and likely not a place or condition a contractor will even want to risk working on to get pump sites back up and running.
- ♦ High flow erosion impacts were not considered in EIS. Loss in riverbank equals a loss of property.

Low Flow Issues:

- ♦ The minimum 8,000 cfs allowable is too low for most pump sites to operate.
- ♦ Most irrigators require 10,500 cfs to irrigate comfortably.
- ♦ The EIS is unclear in that it does not adequately address how many intakes are inoperable at 8,000 cfs.

Overall Issues:

- ♦ Impacts to irrigation are repeatedly described as “temporary” or “short-term.”
- ♦ Impacts from low flows occur during prime irrigation season, when temperatures are at their highest and the need for water is the greatest.
- ♦ The loss of one year’s crop could put a farmer out of business for good.
- ♦ If the test flow is implemented, irrigators will need enough time ahead to prepare their irrigation intakes and pump sites.
- ♦ Impacts to the Fort Peck Rural and Municipal water supply that serves the four counties is not accounted for.
- ♦ There may be impacts to Fort Peck Reservation Irrigation projects and Buford Trenton Irrigation.
- ♦ A significant percentage of Sidney Sugars’ beet crop comes from irrigated acres along the Missouri River. If multiple pump sites become unusable, it will result in sugar beet crop failure, which could cause Sidney Sugars to close.
- ♦ Loss of livestock feed sources for Eastern Montana including irrigated, forage crops and beet pulp from Sidney Sugars.



Pictured is a side channel intake pump site. The intake will be laden with silt after a high flow event. The silt will be difficult and dangerous to remove.



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